

Documenting a Town's Trails Vision

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What Are the Goals of a Town Trails Vision?

- They need to be uniquely identified for each town
- An opportunity to take into account:
 - The current state of the town's trails
 - Residents' attitudes towards trails, recreation, business development, education, and tourism
 - The financial resources required
 - The potential benefits and challenges
- An opportunity to develop a town consensus on the relative priorities of all proposed trail projects
- An opportunity to develop an implementation plan for moving forward

My Goals Today

- To describe the 9-step process Groton used in developing its Trails Vision
- To highlight what I believe are the **KEY** steps or sub-steps, regardless of how you might tailor the overall process for your town
- To describe the benefits I believe you can receive by going through this process in your town

#1: Charter a Vision Committee

- Formally charter an ad hoc or standing committee to raise awareness and to establish schedule expectations
- **KEY:** Seek broad representation on committee to strengthen the consensus recommendations. Seek members who have deep knowledge of the town's processes that will need to be used in implementing the vision, such as members of the following town boards, committees, etc.:
 - Trails Committee
 - Planning Board
 - Conservation Commission
 - Council on Aging
 - Commission on Accessibility
 - Parks Commission
 - Sustainability Commission
 - Economic Development Committee
 - Historical Commission
 - Greenways Committee
- Six to nine members are recommended in order to balance diversity and group dynamics

#2: Define What Is Meant by “Trails”



Trails considered in Groton's report:

- Woods Trail
- Path
- Pathway
- Sidewalk
- Dirt Road
- Rail Trail
- “Blue” (River) Trail

Uses not considered in Groton's report:

- Snowmobiles
- Other Motorized Vehicles (motorbikes, ATVs, etc.)

Groton's Trails Vision, 2014-2019

Report can be downloaded at <http://www.townofgroton.org/Town/BoardsCommittees/TrailsVisionCommittee.aspx>

#3: Document Purposes, Vision, and Values

- Purposes
 - At a high level, what is wanted and why?
 - Who benefits and in what ways?
 - To create a plan for moving forward after the document is finished
- Vision
 - What would the town be like if all the projects identified in the vision were realized?
- Values
 - Where is the committee coming from? What do they believe in?
- **KEY:** Discussions of these items, or similar ones, will help the committee identify areas of agreement and disagreement at a high level of abstraction and will help to identify paths to consensus on specific projects

#4: Take Stock of What Exists

- Describe/understand/document existing practices by boards and committees in town that foster the goals of the Trails Vision Committee
- Describe/understand/document the existing infrastructure that will be expanded and/or enhanced by the projects identified in the vision document
- Providing everyone on the Trails Vision Committee with a solid understanding of the current conditions will help in “racking and stacking” the projects that the committee identifies

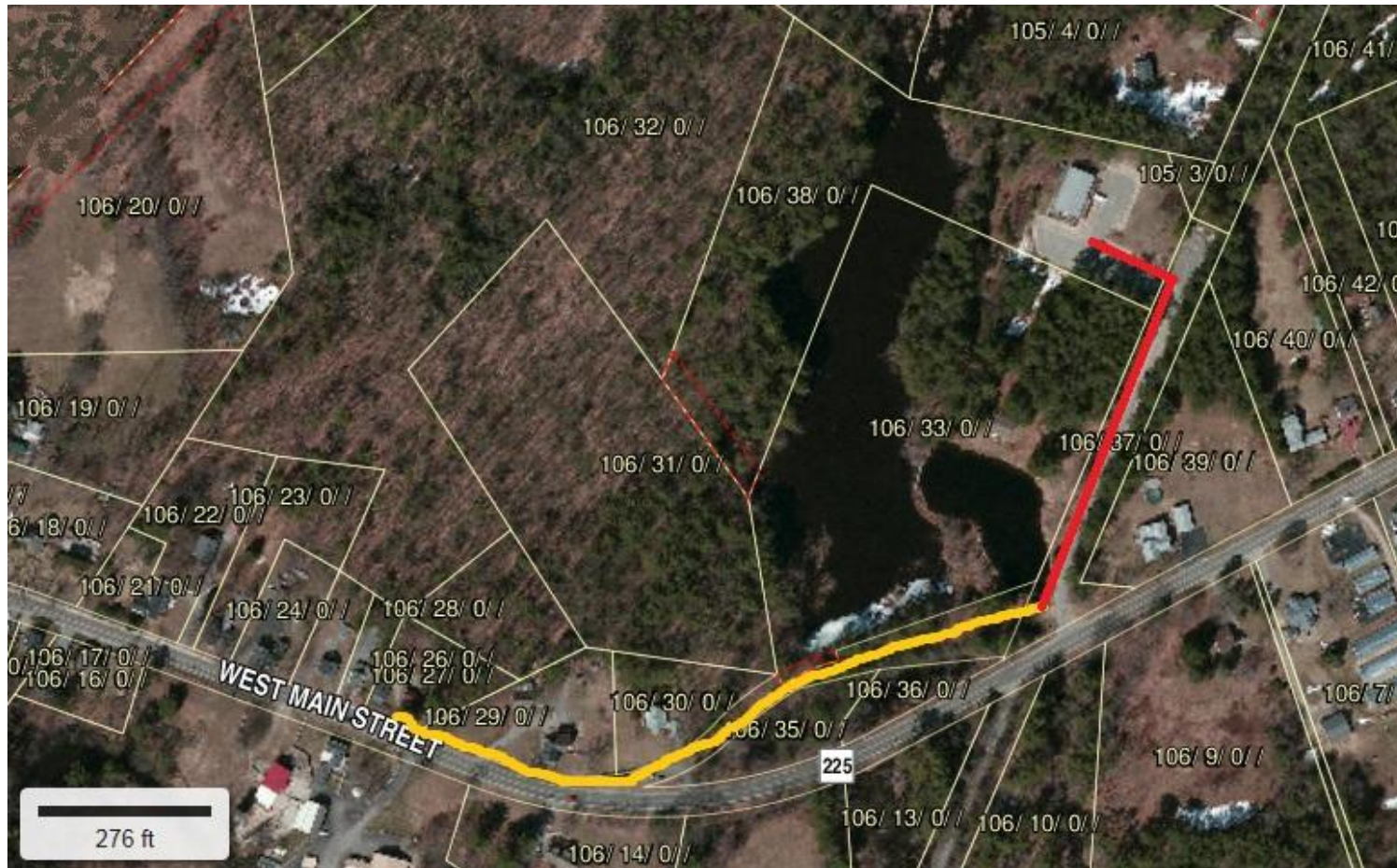
#5: Identify All Potential Projects

- **KEY:** Assemble a good number of potential projects from all sources
 - From current “Open Space and Recreation Plan,” if one exists
 - From current “Town Master Plan,” if one exists
 - Projects that have been “talked about” by residents, volunteers, et al.
 - Any additional projects offered by members of the Trails Vision Committee
- **KEY:** The Vision Committee should discuss each project enough so that everyone understands
 - Scope and rationale for project
 - High-level design of project
 - Challenges to implementation of project

#6: Organize Projects Into Groups

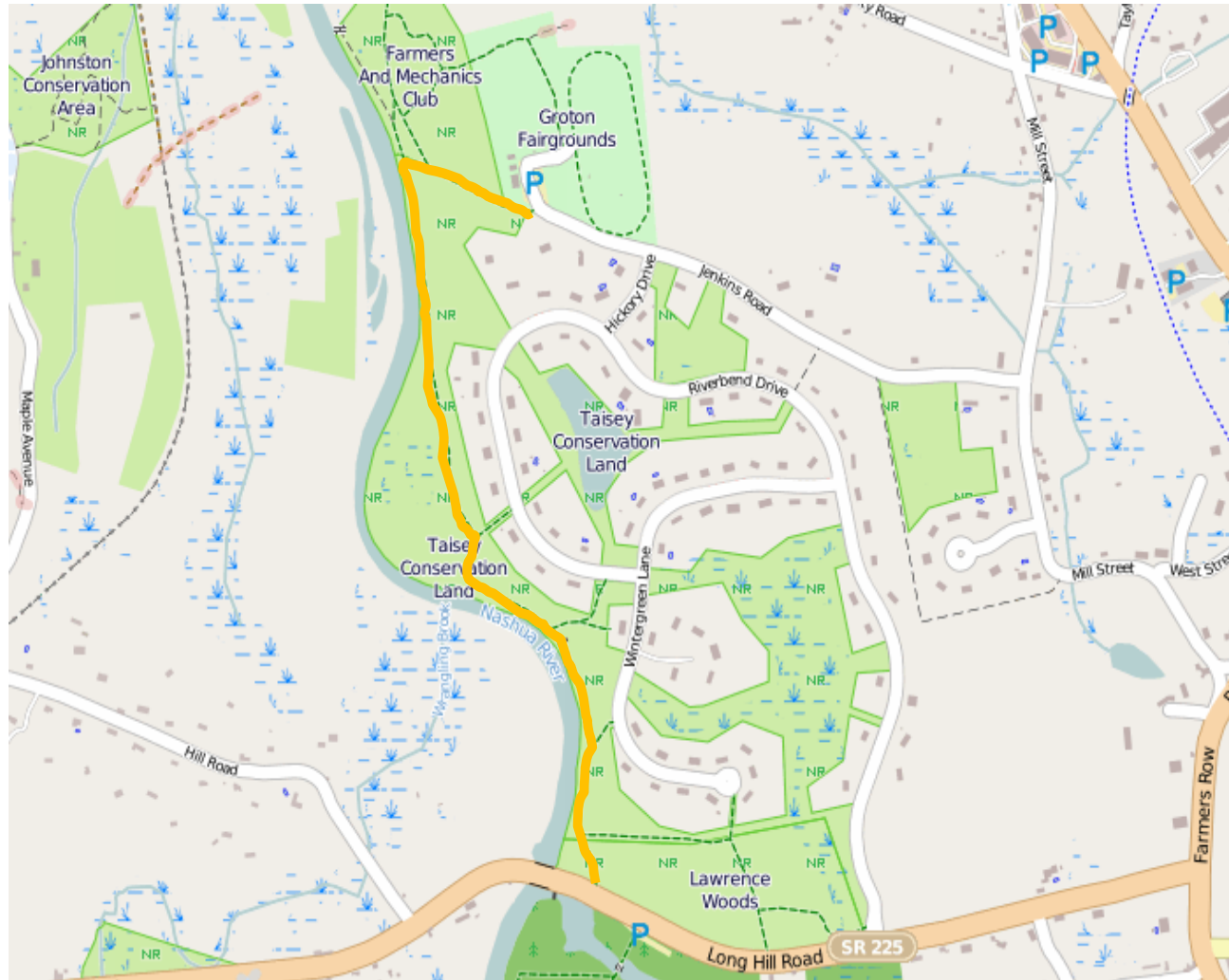
- Each town should develop its own way of organizing the recommended projects
- In Groton's Trails Vision, we grouped 23 projects into three categories:
 1. Those that connect existing pathways with new desirable destinations
 2. Those that enhance accessibility and/or recreational and/or educational opportunities
 3. Those that involve the development of new local and inter-town pathways

Example 1: Extend Sidewalk to Senior Center



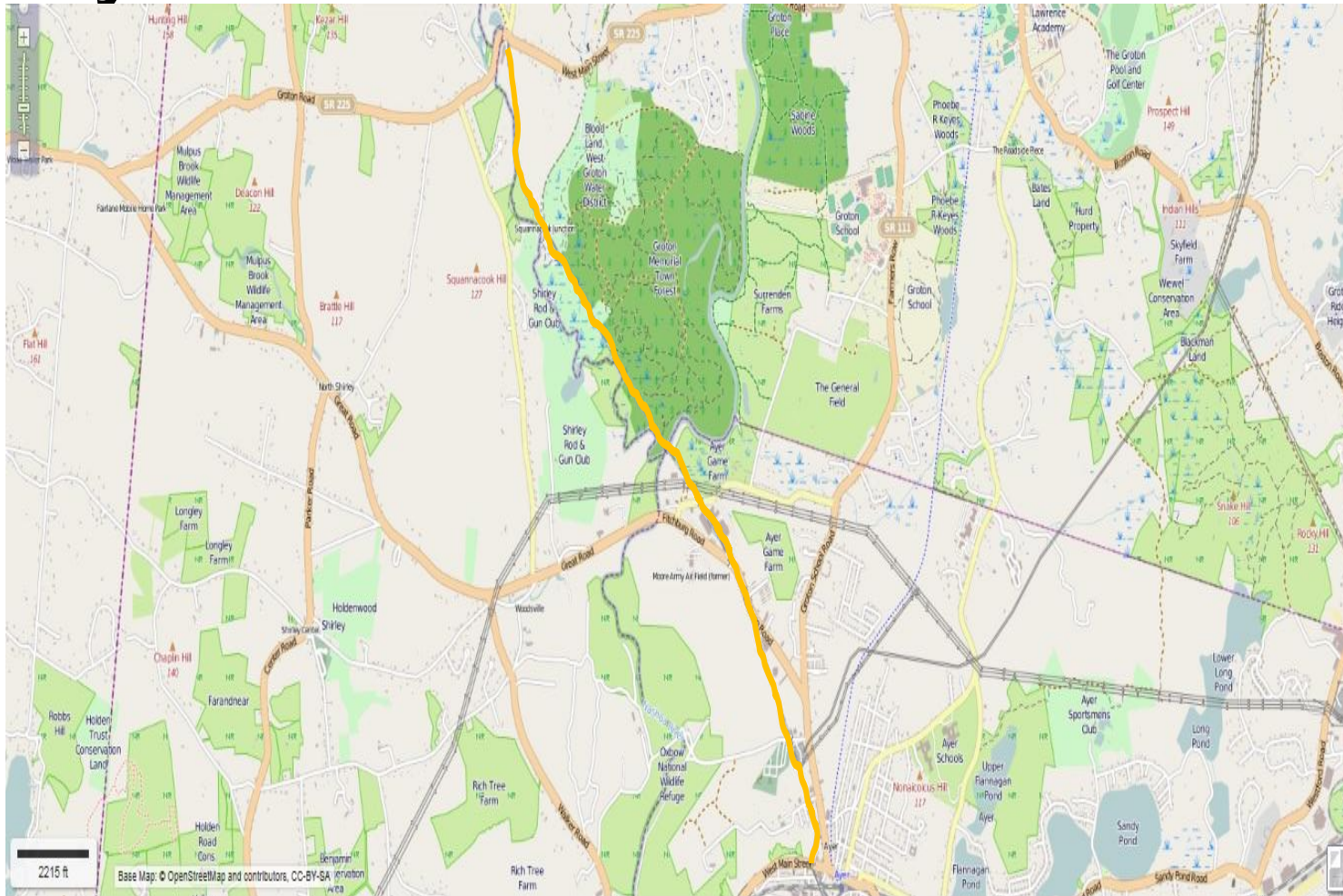
- Sidewalk on a busy road from W. Groton Center currently ends 0.25 miles from Senior Center driveway
- Old road right-of-way can provide scenic path through the woods and past a pond
- Benches can be added for rest and nature viewing
- W. Groton senior citizens could safely get additional exercise and have a pleasant woods experience on their way to the Senior Center

Example 2: Nashua Riverwalk



- Fully-accessible trail along the Nashua River, 1.2 miles long
- Ample parking at both ends, but in need of upgrading for handicap access
- Benches can be added for rest and nature viewing
- Adjacent to Groton's largest subdivision, to an equestrian center (old fairgrounds), to a canoe/kayak rental business, and to conserved land & trails both to the north and south
- Could become centerpiece of Groton's Trails Network

Example 3: Rail Trail From W. Groton to Ayer



- Convert railroad right-of-way into 2.1 mile Rail Trail
- Will provide multiple access points to Groton's Town Forest
- Will connect conservation parcels on east and west banks of the Nashua River
- Will provide a safe and healthy alternative for commuter access to/from Ayer Commuter Rail Station
- Requires transfer of ownership of right-of-way

#7: Prioritize Projects

- **KEY:** Discussing how best to prioritize projects is another important way to develop consensus on the committee
- There is no best way; find what works for your town and your committee
- We used 3 dimensions and had 3 relative ratings in each dimension:
 1. Benefit (small number of users, a medium number of users, a large number of users)
 2. Time Period (1-2 years, 3-4 years, 5 or more years)
 3. Cost (<\$25K, \$25K-\$250K, >\$250K)
- Projects within a group (see Step #6) were prioritized first by Time Period, then by Benefit, and then by Cost, since the Committee wanted to emphasize the “low hanging fruit” and “biggest bang for the buck” projects within each type
- The committee felt that the community would support more of the projects if they saw several examples of what could be done within the first 5 years

#8: **KEY:** Develop Implementation Plan

- While towns (like all of us!) are often aware of many projects that are desired, it is enormously helpful to have both a vision and a rational plan for accomplishing the projects that collectively achieve the vision
- The implementation plan that is developed should represent a broad consensus opinion on the merits and challenges of the projects identified; as such, it can help to focus attention on how best to implement a project rather than defending whether it should be implemented or not
- An implementation plan can provide transparency and predictability to the town's budget process, which may improve the likelihood that the individual trails projects will be supported by the Town Manager/Selectmen/Finance Committee

#9: **KEY:** Sustain the Vision

- Continuously seek advocates who will lead the highest priority projects to completion; without such people, progress will stop
- The implementation plan, and some of the projects themselves, will undoubtedly change over time due to development, storm damage, property transfers, etc., so plan for an update every 5-10 years
- Celebrate the projects that are completed; this will inform the citizens of the progress being made and will likely increase their demand for completing additional projects

Final Thoughts

- A long-term trails vision for a town is likely to get lost if it is not documented
- A documented trails vision is less likely to be ignored by a town if it represents the views of many people, each with different perspectives
- People are more likely to support a trail implementation plan that considers many alternatives and prioritizes the most promising ones based on reasonable selection criteria
- “Success breeds success.” A track record of implementing successful trail projects that provide clear benefits is likely to garner continuing public support for an overarching trails vision